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Child and Family Social Work

COULD DO BETTER!

Exploring the Effects of Multiple Care Factors on the Educational Achievement of Children Looked After at Home and Away from Home: An investigation of two Scottish Local Authorities

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a research project which explored the care factors that influence the educational achievement of looked after children. The project was innovative because it focused on children looked after at home, and away from home. A mixed methods strategy was adopted to analyse data from two large Scottish local authorities. The project developed, what is to date, the largest dataset which includes variables for one fifth of children discharged from care in Scotland over a five year period. The qualitative element of the project collected in-depth data on the care and education experiences of looked after children and care leavers.

The overall finding is that looked after children perform less well academically than their counterparts in the general school population. The empirical data indicates that factors such as placement type, reason for becoming looked after and age on becoming looked after were significant in determining educational achievement. Empirical results further indicated that looked after children suffered from discrimination and social exclusion in many areas of their lives, including school and where they lived.

Key words: looked after children, care experiences, leaving care and education.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing concern in the last decade about the poor educational experience and achievement of the many children looked after by local authorities in the United Kingdom (Barnardo's, 2006; Borland *et al*, 1998; Borland, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Jackson and Thomas, 2000; Jackson and McParlin, 2006; Maxwell *et al*, 2006; and the Social Inclusion Unit, 2003). Some clear messages emerge from these studies, primarily the extent to which looked after children are disadvantaged and are less likely to take up opportunities. But also how the experience of being looked after has a longer term effect. Children who are looked after frequently grow up to be amongst the most vulnerable adults in society where social mobility and transition to adulthood are increasingly problematic (Berridge, 2006). This paper reports the findings of a research project which explored the care factors that influence the

educational achievement of look after children in two large Scottish local authorities. We report results from qualitative research concerning looked after children, and the statistical analysis of a specialist large-scale dataset.

EXPERIENCE OF BEING LOOKED AFTER

In Scotland, children who are in the care of local authorities are described as 'looked after' under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Children can be 'looked after' whilst remaining at their usual home, or 'looked after' in residential care, or in foster care. Those in residential and foster care are sometimes referred to as being 'look after and accommodated'. The majority of children in Scotland are looked after at home (Scottish Government, 2005). In this paper we will use the term 'looked after' to refer to all children in local authority care, and where appropriate we will make the distinction between those looked after at their usual home and those accommodated away from their usual home.

When a child becomes looked after it becomes the responsibility of the local authority to ensure that the care the child is receiving is better than the care given before it became looked after. This includes the educational dimension of their care (HMI and SWSI, 2001). Educational achievement is fundamentally important to the life chances of most children. The right to education is enshrined in the UN convention on the 'Rights of the Child', and attaining success in education is a '*graduated staircase*' to success in adulthood in terms of occupation, income and life style (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005:232). However, the socio-economic risk factors that are associated with family breakdown and admission to care also predict low educational achievement (Berridge, 2006), so whilst children in public care span a full range of educational potential, they do not in general perform as well as other children living in their local area. Jackson (1999) and Jackson and McParlin (2006) report that even those looked after children who attend school regularly are unlikely to reach their educational potential, unless active measures are taken to compensate for earlier disadvantages. We envisage that the minimum educational aim that looked after children do as well as all other children cannot easily be achieved because looked after children have so many disadvantages that they need to perform a good deal better than other children to succeed in life.

UNDERLYING CAUSES FOR EDUCATIONAL UNDER ACHIEVEMENT

Maxwell *et al* (2006) identified that there are four underlying causes for the educational under achievement of looked after children. Placement instability has been linked to poor educational outcomes as looked after children frequently have too many placement changes, and school changes, which can be unsettling. Poor school attendance has also been identified as a contributory factor along with the lack of support that children receive at school. The lack of sufficient support and encouragement where looked after children live has been identified as another factor contributing to the educational under achievement of the looked after population. Last, the lack of adequate support with emotional, mental and physical health and wellbeing has been identified as a contributing factor to the poor educational achievement of looked after children.

FAILURE OF THE CORPORATE PARENT

There are those who hold the view that the care system is failing looked after children because there is a general lack of shared knowledge between Social Work and Education Services in local authorities about each other's services, and that they do not currently work well together to communicate regularly about the children in their care (Barnardo's, 2006; Bullock *et al*, 2006; Fletcher-Campbell, 1998; Francis, 2000; Jackson and McParlin, 2006; Walker, 1994; and Who Cares? Scotland, 2003). It is arguable that historically, local authorities have accepted little responsibility for the educational achievement (or failure) of looked after children (Jackson and McParlin, 2006 and Barnardo's, 2006). Instead, they have blamed the low achievement of the looked after population on the disadvantaged

backgrounds that these children have come from. Jackson (1999) argues that, research has begun to illustrate that the poor educational achievement of looked after children is often a product of the weaknesses within the care system rather than individual children.

Current literature would suggest that the Westminster Government, the Scottish Government, and local authorities are all aware of these problems. The under achievement of looked after children has been well documented in a range of recent government studies and reports (OFSTED/SSI, 1996; OFSTED, 2000; HMI and SWSI, 2001; Social Inclusion Unit, 2003; Scottish Government, 2006; and Scottish Government, 2007a). National statistics report persistent underachievement by looked after children. This questions the success of the raft of policies that have been floated to tackle this issue. Statistical returns collected by local authorities in Scotland for the period 2007/08 illustrate the extent of the problem.¹ Ninety one percent of the general school population attained 5 or more awards at SCQF level 3 or above (Scottish Government, 2007b). By contrast, only 66% of those children looked after away from home attained only one or more award at SCQF level 3 and only 53% of children looked at home attained one or more award at SCQF level 3 (Audit Scotland, 2008). Similarly, whilst 91% of the general pupil population in Scotland attained English and Maths at SCQF level 3 or above (Scottish Government, 2007b), only 31% of children looked after at home attained English and Maths at SCQF level 3 or above compared to 76% of children (Audit Scotland, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

This project adopts a mixed methods approach (Bergman, 2008). The project developed a quantitative dataset from official and administrative records and collected qualitative data. An original feature of the project is the development of a specialist quantitative dataset relating to the educational achievement of children looked after away from home and children looked after at home. Despite the size of this latter group, most studies relating to children who are looked after at home generally do not concentrate on education but in the care aspect of their lives. The quantitative dataset is the largest specialist dataset containing information on looked after children in Scotland. It is a Census (i.e. 100%) of all looked after children in two Scottish local authorities (n=1407) who were aged over 15 years old and were discharged from care over a five year period (2000/01-2004/05). The dataset is a large-scale resource and contains 20% of all of the looked after children in Scotland aged 15 years or over who were discharged from care within the five year period. The dataset includes measures relating to educational achievement and social care measures for children in care (approximately 40 variables) and therefore facilitates multivariate data analyses that would not be possible with other existing data resources.

The project was further enhanced with a qualitative component. In-depth information was collected on the care and educational experiences of a sample of looked after children (n=30). This information was gathered via one to one in-depth interviews with the looked after children. Areas such as placement history, placement experience, support from carers and professionals, school experiences, school exclusions, support from teachers and pupils, decision making and general social exclusion was considered in the interviews.² A purposive sampling approach was adopted for this element of the project.

FINDINGS

ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN KEY CARE FACTORS

¹ The qualifications framework for the each country within the UK can be found at- <http://www.staff.stir.ac.uk/vernon.gayle/documents/TheQualificationsFrameworkintheUK.pdf>

² It was only possible to collect qualitative data from local authority 1.

In this section we report statistical results from the specialist looked after children dataset. The overall message from the analysis of this dataset was that looked after children from both Local Authorities did less well academically than counterparts in the general school population. This finding chimes with existing research and with official Scottish data.

Figure I: Summary of Associated Care Factors

Measures	Values	
First and Last Placement	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.710
Age Received into Care and Placement Type	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.423
Received into Care Reason and Age Received into Care	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.380
Received into Care Reason and Placement Type	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.377
Received into Care Reason and Length of Time Looked After	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.290
Length of Time Looked After and Placement Type	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.016
Age Received into Care and Number of Placements	p<0.05	Gamma =-.381
Number of Placements and Last Placement Type	p<0.05	Crammer's V=.251
Received into Care Reason and Discharge Accommodation	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.425
Placement Type and Discharge Accommodation	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.636
Placement Type and Age on Discharge	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.154

Note: Crammer's V has been used as a measure of association for two categorical variables and Gamma has been used as a measure of association where the variable is ordered.

In terms of care experiences and educational achievement, largely the research findings were as we had anticipated, as looked after children in Authority 1 and Authority 2 performed less well academically than the general school population. This mirrored the educational achievement of looked after children throughout Scotland. We were able to identify that care factors and educational achievement were inter-connected and that looked after children with a specific set of care factors were likely to perform better educationally than other children with another set of care factors. For instance, where a child was looked after (placement type) proved to be significant in terms of academic achievement. However, we found that a number of care factors actually led to a looked after child being placed in a particular placement setting. As illustrated in Figure I, we established that the age a child became looked after and the reason for becoming looked after had a bearing on placement type. Indeed, children who became looked after when they were under 12 years old were more likely to be looked after away from home and children who became looked after when they were 12 years old or over tended to be looked after at home or in residential care. Similarly, children who became looked after as a result of non attendance at school or school exclusion were mostly being looked after at home. This is likely to have had some influence on the educational achievement of children looked after at home³.

We were also able to establish that children who became looked after when they were under 12 years old were likely to have more placements than those children who became looked after when they were 12 years old or over. This is a crucial finding as our empirical evidence demonstrates that Authority 1 and Authority 2 are not paying close attention to reducing the number of placements that looked after children have. This will have had serious consequences for these children, as it has been demonstrated that placement changes without close attention to continuity, can result in looked after children being out of schools for long periods of time, and it can also result in a drop in achievement levels (Jackson and Thomas, 2000; and Biehal *et al*, 1995). Additionally, we found that there was a correlation between number of placements and placement type with children in residential care having more placements than those in foster care. Again, this is another significant finding, and it

³ A full data analysis can be found at –

http://www.staff.stir.ac.uk/vernon.gayle/documents/TablesAssociatedwithFigure1_4.pdf

raises questions about the different environments that these children are living in (i.e. family setting over group living), and about how effective each setting is at nurturing, supporting and providing these children with a stable environment. From our research findings we could speculate that generally residential care is unable to provide looked after children with the same kind of stability that foster care can generally provide.

On discharge from care, the majority of looked after children remained or returned to the family home but we found that the reason for becoming looked after had a bearing on whether a child returned home or whether they lived elsewhere. We were able to ascertain that significantly higher proportions of children who had become looked after as a result of offending behaviour or carer alcohol and drug misuse lived outwith the family home when discharged from care. Other care factors such as placement type were found to contribute to discharge destination, with almost all children on home supervision remaining in the family home on discharge from care. Whereas, we determined that the majority of children who had been in residential care were living in supported accommodation or had their own tenancies on leaving care. We found that children who had been in foster care were the least likely to return to the family home on discharge from care. This could be related to expectations of family life following time in foster care, or that family ties were not as strong for those who had been in foster care, especially where they have been offered an appropriate alternative family environment. Overall, it is quite interesting that the majority of looked after children return to their family homes (or remain at home for those on home supervision orders) on discharge from care, and with this are returning to many of the issues associated with them becoming looked after in the first instance. This could perhaps explain why many people who have been looked after are still found to be at a higher risk of social exclusion on into their twenties. The long term affects of being looked after have been evidenced in studies, for example Dixon and Stein (2002); Courtney and Dworsky (2006); and Cashmore *et al* (2007).

HOW CARE FACTORS INFLUENCE THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Figure II: Summary of Associated Care Factors and Educational Attainment

Measures	Values	
SCQF Level 3 Awards		
SCQF Level 3 and Placement	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.356
SCQF Level 3 and Age Received into Care	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.154
SCQF Level 3 and Gender	p<0.05	Crammer's V=.067
SCQF Level 3 and Number of Placements	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.287
SCQF Level 4 Awards and Placement		
1 Award	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.377
3 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.424
5 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.379
SCQF Level 4 Awards and Received into Care Reason		
1 Award	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.277
3 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.309
5 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.356
SCQF Level 4 Awards and Age Received into Care Age		
1 Award	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.222
3 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.233
5 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.225
SCQF Level 4 Awards and Gender		
1 Award	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.113

3 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.109
5 Awards	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.110
SCQF Level 4 in English and Maths		
SCQF Level 4 English and Maths by Placement Type	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.309
SCQF Level 4 English and Maths by Age Received into Care	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.261
SCQF Level 6 Awards by Placement		
1 Award	p<0.001	Crammer's V=.247
3 Awards	p<0.05	Crammer's V=.113

Note: Crammer's V has been used as a measure of association for two categorical variables.

We were able to illustrate that looked after children performed less well than the general school population across all SCQF levels, and that children looked after at home performed less well than all other looked after children at all SCQF levels. We found that children in residential care performed as poorly as those looked after at home when we considered higher level awards such as 5 or more awards at SCQF level 4 or above. At specific SCQF levels, other care factors such as the age a child was when they became looked after, gender, and the primary reason for becoming looked after, were also significant factors in determining educational achievement.

As reported in Figure II above, children who became looked after when they were younger (under 12) out performed older children across all SCQF level awards. We theorise that this might be because children who became looked after when they were younger tended to live in foster care and have more settled lives. Generally, this meant they were more equipped for learning. The empirical findings also demonstrated that females out performed males across all SCQF level awards, as they do in the general school population. Generally, the number of placements a child had was not significant but we anticipate that this a result of the low numbers of children in the sample that we were able to collect this information for, rather than it not being a significant factor in determining educational achievement (See Figure II above)⁴.

A good indicator of literacy and numeracy levels in the school population is the proportions achieving English and Maths. In this project we found that the achievement of English and Maths was influenced by placement type and age on becoming looked after. In comparison to all other looked after children, a far higher proportion of children in foster care attained English and Maths at SCQF level 4 or above. Children in residential care performed as poorly as those looked after at home. Nevertheless, greater proportions of children in residential care attained English only at SCQF level 4 compared to those looked after at home. This again is a crucial finding as English and Maths at SCQF level 3 is often a requirement to gain entry to low level employment and foundation level college courses and our results demonstrate that children looked after at home are the least likely of all looked after children to gain entry to either. Correspondingly, children who became looked after when they were younger (under 12) were more likely to attain English and Maths than those who became looked after when they were 12 years old or over. This is not surprising as we have been able to determine that it is mostly children who are looked after at home that become looked after when they are 12 years old or over, and as has been noted previously, children looked after at home perform the least well overall. This raises the issue about the suitability of home supervision for those children requiring supervision orders.

THE EFFECTS OF MULTIPLE CARE FACTORS ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

⁴ We are persuaded that the missing data is not consequential and does not alter the substantive findings.

Figure III: Summary of Combined Effects of Gender and Placement Type on Achievement (Standard Logistic Regression Models)

1. 1 or More at SCQF Level 3 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	2.18	0.24	80.2	1	<0.001	8.83
Residential Care	1.3	0.14	91.18	1	<0.001	3.69
Female	0.38	0.13	9.2	1	<0.001	1.47
Foster Care * Female	-0.75	0.34	4.79	1	<0.05	0.47
Constant	-0.69	0.09	59.62	1	<0.001	0.5
Cox and Snell R ² = .130 ; Nagelkerke R ² = .173.						
2.1 or More at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	2.41	0.22	116.5	1	<0.001	11.11
Residential Care	1.06	0.14	60.02	1	<0.001	2.89
Female	0.6	0.13	20.55	1	<0.001	1.83
Foster Care * Female	-0.67	0.32	4.37	1	<0.05	0.51
Constant	-1.41	0.1	186.3	1	<0.001	0.24
Cox and Snell R ² = .146; Nagelkerke R ² = .198.						
3. 3 or More at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	2.36	0.17	195.1	1	<0.001	10.55
Residential Care	0.42	0.17	5.99	1	<0.001	1.51
Female	0.5	0.14	12.65	1	<0.001	1.64
Constant	-2.03	0.12	280.3	1	<0.001	0.13
Cox and Snell R ² = .15; Nagelkerke R ² = .23.						
4. 5 or More at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	2.1	0.18	135.9	1	<0.001	8.15
Residential Care	-0.06	0.23	0.06	1	>0.05	0.95
Female	0.58	0.16	12.59	1	<0.001	1.78
Constant	-2.59	0.15	303.1	1	<0.001	0.08
Cox and Snell R ² = .12; Nagelkerke R ² = .20.						
5. English at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	2.16	0.17	167.1	1	<0.001	8.65
Residential	0.7	0.16	18.88	1	<0.001	2.01
Female	0.66	0.14	23.99	1	<0.001	1.94
Constant	-2.08	0.12	292.9	1	<0.001	0.13
Cox and Snell R ² = .14; Nagelkerke R ² = .20.						
6. English and Maths at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	2.34	0.19	147.8	1	<0.001	10.36
Residential Care	0.29	0.24	1.48	1	>0.05	1.34
Female	0.57	0.17	10.96	1	<0.001	1.77
Constant	-2.89	0.17	304.9	1	<0.001	0.06
Cox and Snell R ² = .12; Nagelkerke R ² = .22.						

Through the examination of the combined effects of gender and placement type on the educational achievement of all 1407 looked after children in our sample, we have been able to demonstrate some of the significant subtleties. As demonstrated in Figure III, across all levels children looked after at home performed less well than children looked after away from

home, a widely documented outcome. However, on further examination we found that whilst children in residential care out performed their male and female counterparts who were looked after at home, in lower level SCQF awards (1 or more at SCQF level 3 or above and 1 or more at SCQF level 4 or above), they performed as poorly as their male and female counterparts who were looked after at home when consideration was given to higher level awards (3 or more at SCQF level 4 or above and 5 or more at SCQF level 4 or above). At lower levels (1 or more at SCQF level 3 or above and 1 or more at SCQF level 4 or above) males in foster care out performed all other looked after children, including females in foster care. This runs counter to the trends in the general school population, where females outperform males across all levels. However, females out performed their male counterparts in all other placement settings (See Figure III above).

Figure IV: Summary of Combined Effects of Received into Care Reason, Age on Entering Care and Placement Type on Achievement (Standard Logistic Regression Models)

1. 1 or More at SCQF Level 3 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	0.83	0.27	9.54	1	<0.001	2.29
Residential Care	0.11	0.18	0.35	1	>0.05	1.11
Received into Care Under 12	0.46	0.21	4.99	1	<0.05	1.59
Female	0.51	0.16	9.79	1	<0.001	1.66
Constant	-0.49	0.12	15.64	1	<0.001	0.61
Cox and Snell R ² =.05; Nagelkerke R ² =.07.						
2. 1 or More at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	0.99	0.36	7.47	1	<0.05	2.7
Residential Care	0.25	0.25	1.04	1	>0.05	1.29
Received into Care Under 12	0.89	0.27	10.69	1	<0.001	2.44
Parental Reasons	0.47	0.22	4.64	1	<0.05	1.61
Constant	-0.93	0.15	36.78	1	<0.001	0.39
Cox and Snell R ² =.12; Nagelkerke R ² =.16.						
3. 3 or More at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	1.28	0.35	13	1	<0.001	3.59
Residential Care	0.15	0.28	0.31	1	>0.05	1.17
Received into Care Under 12	0.85	0.28	9.33	1	<0.001	2.33
Parental Reasons	0.64	0.24	6.93	1	<0.05	1.9
Constant	-1.66	0.18	81.12	1	<0.001	0.19
Cox and Snell R ² =.15; Nagelkerke R ² =.21.						
4. 5 or More at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	1.64	0.37	19.86	1	<0.001	5.16
Residential Care	-0.41	0.37	1.28	1	>0.05	0.66
Received into Care Under 12	0.64	0.31	4.11	1	<0.05	1.89
Parental Reasons	0.96	0.29	10.58	1	<0.001	2.61
Constant	-2.3	0.23	97.08	1	<0.001	0.1
Cox and Snell R ² =.19; Nagelkerke R ² =.29.						
5. English at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	1.46	0.32	21.31	1	<0.001	4.32
Residential Care	0.04	0.3	0.02	1	>0.05	1.04
Parental Reasons	0.65	0.26	6.29	1	<0.05	1.91
Constant	-1.79	0.19	85.46	1	<0.001	0.17
Cox and Snell R ² =.10; Nagelkerke R ² =.15.						
6. English and Maths at SCQF Level 4 or Above	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster Care	1.08	0.37	8.28	1	<0.001	2.94
Residential Care	-0.31	0.38	0.67	1	>0.05	0.73

Received into Care Under 12	0.86	0.32	7.06	1	<0.05	2.36
Parental Reasons	0.68	0.31	4.72	1	<0.05	1.97
Constant	-2.42	0.24	98.65	1	<0.001	0.09
Cox and Snell R ² =.119; Nagelkerke R ² =.198						

Whilst this is indeed an important observation, it is perhaps the regression models which follow that provide the greatest insight into the impact that combined care factors have on educational achievement in the looked after population. In these we explored the relationship between educational achievement and multiple key care factors such as last placement type, gender, age on becoming looked after and reason for becoming looked after (see Figure IV above). Through the application of a multivariate approach (standard logistic regression models) we were able to confirm that when all of these factors were considered together in a statistical model that gender was no longer significant. However, placement, age on becoming looked after and the reason for becoming looked after were jointly significant in determining educational achievement. For instance, children who were less than 12 years old when they became looked after and who became looked after as a result of parental behaviour were more successful educationally than children in the same placement types who became looked after when they were over 12 years of age, as result of their own behaviour. Generally speaking children in foster care out performed children looked after at home and in residential care, however in some instances these children out performed children in foster care. Specifically, those children who became looked after when they were under 12 years old as a result of parental behaviour. Essentially, the empirical findings illustrate that becoming looked after as a result of parental behaviour before the age of 12 is more likely to lead to better educational achievements. However, becoming looked after as a result of their own behaviour, at aged 12 or over, is less likely to lead to better educational achievements. This raises the wider question, namely whether the differences are related to placement types *per se*, or to the populations of children which are allocated to these two destinations. We envisage that there will also be independent factors that affect educational achievement that we have cannot be explored in this current research project because of the scope and limitations of the available data resources.

OTHER FACTORS IMPACTING ON EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND ACHIEVEMENT

The qualitative data provided further explanation for the poor educational achievement of looked after children. In the research only three quarters of looked after children said they could talk to and felt supported by teaching staff, care staff, parents and carers. The quarter who said they had no one to talk to were mostly living in residential units. Of all the children involved in the research for this project, only 60% said that there was at least one person who asked them about school on a regular basis. This included teaching staff, care staff, parents and carers. When asked who should know that a child was looked after, mostly children thought that head teachers and guidance teachers are the only people who should be told they are looked after. Although, over half of the children did not know what their school had been told about them being looked after and over half of the children stated that no one had helped them work out what they were going to tell other children at school about being looked after. Moreover, only one third of looked after children stated that their social workers had asked them for their views on their education. The research illustrated that children are more likely to be involved in decision making about their care rather than their education. Though, practitioners stated that this involvement in their care is not necessarily to a satisfactory standard. Interestingly, just under one quarter of looked after children thought that their social worker had no contact with their school about them. The majority of these children attended mainstream school and lived in residential units.

In the research only 53% of children were able to identify at least one person who was proud of their achievements and one third of the children felt that they were treated more negatively by teachers because they were looked after. The majority of these children lived in residential units and were attending mainstream schools. However, fewer children (one fifth) thought they were treated more negatively by pupils because they were looked after. Interestingly, those children who enjoyed school (53%) were more likely not to attend a mainstream school and whilst all children reported having friends at school, 40% reported having no contact with their school friends outside of school. These children were primarily living in residential units or at home with their parents.

We discovered that stability was an important issue, with 80% of looked after children having changed school at least once and 10% having changed school more than 5 times. The primary reasons given by children for school changes were exclusion and placement changes. Indeed, we found that 80% of the children who participated in the research had been excluded from school at some point and that a significantly high proportion of them had been excluded more than once. Almost all children said that an improvement in their behaviour would have prevented them from being excluded from school. As highlighted by the children, this was directly related to the lack of understanding by teachers and pupils over what it was like to be looked after. We find this to be of real concern especially since school exclusion is probably the most serious sanction a British school can use in response to disruptive behaviour (Baron *et al*, 2000).

A correlation between enjoyment of school and school attendance was established with 76% of children stating that they enjoyed school and attended almost all of the time. However, children often refer to the stigma attached to being looked after. One place this is likely to be felt is at school (Lynes and Goddard, 1995). In our research, one third (30%) of the looked after children stated they were treated differently at school by teachers. Almost all of these children were living in residential units and all were attending mainstream schools. All of the children identified being treated differently as a negative because they wanted to be treated like all other pupils. In addition, one quarter (23%) of children thought that teachers expected less of them because they were looked after.

Bullying was also identified as a problem in the project, with just under half (43%) of the children who participated reporting that they had been bullied. Of those who reported being bullied 76% had told someone about the bullying but it had only stopped for 46% of these children. The proportions of children who reported that they experienced bullying is concerning as research has shown that bullying can have profoundly upsetting consequences on a child's physical and mental health and can affect a child's confidence. This of course impacts further on the academic achievement of a group of children who are already disadvantaged (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004).

Authority 1 had an alternative Education Service provision for looked after children, nevertheless the in-depth interview data highlighted that this was under resourced and did not provide services to all factions of the looked after community. What is more, Authority 1 had developed a resource to help looked after children with homework but this resource did not provide support to all looked after children, especially those on home supervision and at college. Indeed, just under half (43%) of those children who said they received homework had no one to help them with their homework and just over a quarter of looked after children did not have a quiet place to study where they lived. Primarily, these were children living in residential units. However, almost all of those children who reported having access to study space but reported that they did not use it were children who were looked after at home. Also, children looked after at home were far less likely to have access to a PC at home than all other looked after children. However, it was reported that children living in residential units were not always able to access PC's in the units where they lived. This was due to study rooms being made bedrooms because of over crowding or broken PC's not being repaired. Additionally, we were able to ascertain that almost all children had access to books where

they lived (86%). The 14% who did not have access to books where they lived were all looked after at home.

Overall, we consider that these findings provide improved insights into the day to day world of looked after children. They illuminate important practical obstacles that obstruct the education of looked after children. They also provide some explanation as to why children in foster care perform significantly better at school than children who are looked after at home or in residential care settings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are three messages that emerge from the empirical research findings. These are that:

1. There is a relationship between key care factors and educational achievement. When we take a multi dimensional view of the relationship between key care factors and educational achievement, it is a specific combination of key factors that determine different levels of educational achievement within the looked after population.
2. The Corporate Parent has not yet been wholly effective in improving the educational achievement of looked after children.
3. Looked after children are being discriminated against as they continue to perform less well academically than the general school population

The empirical findings illustrate that the looked after population is not a homogenous group. We would argue that the Corporate Parent needs to further consider how to improve the life chances of specific groups of looked after children to ensure that they are, at least, equal to those of all other looked after children. The Corporate Parent must take seriously the negative experiences of many looked after children. In particular more consideration needs to be given to where children are placed when they become looked after, and also to the emotional and practical support needed by children who are looked after at home and in residential care, to ensure that they have the comparable experiences to those in foster care, as a minimum. Similarly, those who became looked after when they were over 12 years of age and those who became looked after as a result of their own behaviour may benefit from additional support to compensate for the experiences that they had prior to becoming looked after.

An emerging feature of the empirical data is that being looked after at home is a distinctive experience that has specific consequences for educational achievement. We strongly recommend that in future researchers take care to recognise that this is a distinctive group of children in care. We also argue that there is an urgent need for research that examines the psychological impacts of being 'looked after' at home.

The experience that looked after children have in school requires further consideration by the Corporate Parent. Looked after children can have a negative experience at school, this is often associated with the stigma of being looked after. Also their relationships with teachers and other children have been found to impact on their experience, particularly for those children in residential care who attend mainstream schools. Additionally, many more looked after children face exclusion from school, and sometimes for long periods. A scheme which targets looked after children and focuses on limiting school exclusions could potentially pay dividends. Further research and evaluation in this area would be beneficial.

The array of social factors we considered were limited by the available data and it may have been beneficial to explore the impact that a wider set of factors had on educational achievement. In particular we suspect that data related to parents and siblings as well as information on parental contact, extra curricular activities and social networks would enable more comprehensive analyses.

We concluded that more detailed empirical research is necessary to establish improved the evidence base for the development of policy frameworks that can deliver better results for looked after children. As a nation we need to be tackling this blight on looked after children and to find champions at all levels to raise the profile of this issue and to push forward change to help these children: **we could all do better!**

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